LIE TO ME: What Conservatives Want If They Can't Change Your Homosexuality

By Michael Alvear

I knew it was going to be a long flight, when I asked the sweet grandmotherly woman sitting next to me why she was flying into town. "I'm the head of a nonprofit Jewish organization," she said. Cool, I thought, until she finished: "We're here to work with the Christian Coalition."

"Oi vey!" I twisted. I turned. I squirmed. I picked up a book. I did not want to have a conversation with this woman. But having grown up with a Jewish grandmother, I knew resistance was futile. So, we talked. And sure enough, she raised a question so Jewish, it practically comes with Matzo balls: "So, are you single? "Yes," I answered, quickly changing the subject. There's a time and a place for coming out. This wasn't one of them. But she kept returning to the subject: "A nice boy like you not married?" I said something about not meeting the right person, and changed the subject again. Ignoring the subject switch, she said, "Well, I bet you have plenty of girls you're dating." I told her I didn't, and changed the subject. Again. She changed the subject right back: "So, really," she asked me. "Tell me why you haven't married." I cracked. I put my book down, turned to her, and said, "I would if I could." She was confused. I looked in her eyes: "I'm gay."

Judging by the length of her silence, I clearly surprised her. And she surprised me right back. Her reaction wasn't at all what I expected. She didn't turn her shoulder, and ignore me for the rest of the flight. She didn't suddenly go quiet, and change the subject. Instead, she narrowed her eyes, and said, "Why do you people constantly flaunt your homosexuality?"

The peace on the plane was about to turn into a fight on the flight. "What do you mean, flaunt," I asked, exasperated. "I've been trying to keep my private life private, but you've been badgering me about it then turned to the woman, saying, "You wanted me to pretend I'm something I'm not, so that you wouldn't feel uncomfortable?" "Yes." "So, honesty is a virtue, unless it makes people uncomfortable!" Now, it was her turn to change the subject. Unfortunately, she turned it to every defamatory and derogatory distortion about gay people she learned from the Christian Coalition.

This was why I was trying to avoid the subject altogether. The only legitimate complaints on an airplane should be the food and the legroom. And now, I had a stranger complaining about the most intimate aspect of my life. I figured I could argue or ignore. The problem with the first strategy was that I'd never win. The problem with the second was that I'd never win. It was a lose-lose proposition. Until I realized I was focusing on the wrong kind of win. I'd never triumph in a debate, because conservatives react to logic and reason the way asthmatics react to pollen dust – badly.

But I could win something else, her heart. The only way to do so was to be everything she wasn't: respectful, considerate, tolerant, gracious, and funny. I didn't let her get away with any of the half-baked lies conservatives love to talk about (AIDS is a gay disease, etc.). But I also made my points in a way that disarmed her.

In the end, I proved what everyone knows intuitively, that what you say doesn't have nearly the power of how you say it. By the time the plane landed, we had moved on to other subjects, laughing and joking all the way through. When she got up to leave, she offered her hand. I took it. "You didn't change my mind about the subject," she said. "But you changed my mind about you."

As I stepped off the plane, I wondered how long it would take her to figure out there wasn't any difference between the two.